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ABSTRACT

The author gives a rationale for utilizing the city as a place to learn. The city has many problems and although logistics require that we conduct most education in the school building, the author argues for putting out best brains to the task of bringing the city to the classroom and to exploiting the city as a classroom when appropriate. Teaching can no longer be done only by professionals. Others such as para-professionals, businessmen, government officials, doctors, artists, parents, neighbors, cab drivers, policemen, etc. can and should be involved in the teaching process because they can often do the job better than the teacher due to their unique and special talents. By learning from these people the student is preparing himself for a life which is closer to the real situations represented, not by the classroom teacher, but by the man on the street. (CWB)

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THE CITY AS CLASSROOM

By

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Delivered before the New York State Council for the Social Studies, Friday, April 23, 1971, Statler Hilton Hotel, Buffalo, New York.

As one who has spent most of his adult life in the maddening but fascinating field of the Social Studies, it is good to meet with those whose lives have been similarly directed and dedicated.

This is not an overwhelmingly good year for social studies. Our raw materials -- namely, our own society and the world -- are not only overrunning our capacity to absorb and to understand; the few glimpses we get that we think ~~that~~ we do understand are uniformally lugubrious.

I am reminded of the sick joke about the fellow who finished reading the Sunday paper and then took his family out to the city dump to get a breath of fresh air.

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But it is no good trying to be an alarmist before a group such as this.

Social Studies teachers, of all people, are not likely in this day and age to be alarmed by anything said by an over-30 college professor, and outside of California the title "Regent" brings no ~~threat~~ terror whatsoever to anyone.

The fact is that you people are alarmed daily by expert alarmers. Actually, you have become so inured to alarms that a sudden flurry of peace and quiet would probably be psychologically unnerving. I am reminded of the lighthouse keeper on a fog-shrouded reef off the Grand Banks who for 30 years listened to an automatic cannon which went off every three minutes to warn away craft that could not see the light through the fog. Thirty years!

Boom! Every three minutes! One early morning when the lighthouse keeper was asleep, something went wrong with the cannon trigger-mechanism and suddenly it failed to go off. The lighthouse keeper bounded out of bed screaming, "My God! What was that!"

There is a lot of dogma around these days that says that only urban schools have any troubles, and that only suburban social studies teachers are smart. I do not intend to beat a dogma with a stigma, but I can only tell you that some rural high schools are manned by social studies teachers who, in their ability to respond to crises, would put many of our urban and suburban school administrators to shame. I heard the other day about the hulking farm boy who burst into the rural history teacher's office and said: "Teach," in my right hand I got a 10" bread knife. In my left hand I got an $18 dollar bill that some city slicker passed off on me and that my pappy says is counterfeit. Now that knife in my right hand tells me that you are going to give me change for that $18 dollar bill in my left hand. The historian calmly replied, "You're damn right young man. Do you want 2 nines or 3 sixes?"

But today I want to talk about cities.

Cities have been classrooms for longer than schools have been. Beginning with the training of scribes and artisans in ancient Thebes and Babylon, through the market-place teaching of Socrates, through the guild apprenticeships of the Hanseatic League, through the spacial disjunctiveness of the medieval universities, up to the present era, a vast dimension of the educational development of the human race has taken place inside cities, but outside of formal school rooms.

Alas, today as we all know, our great cities are classrooms for a lot we wish kids would not learn: how to pop drugs; how to be a successful bully or extortionist; how to pick pockets and shoplift without being caught; how to break windows, bend parking meters, strew toilet paper, and paint

obscenities on public buildings; how to con others into sympathy; how to hate and injure and terrorize; how to beat raps. Social injustice in the cities is a fantastic teacher. Sir Thomas More, in his biting 16th century satire, Utopia, pointed to the fact that crime in England was alarmingly common, but that in a grotesquely unequal society, crime was the only means of livelihood open to a great number of persons. In as terrible a voice as his pen can conjure, More fairly shouts at the England of his day, "What other thing do you do than make thieves and then punish them?"

Can anyone deny that our own cities are, in part, classrooms for making thieves and then punishing them?

But our cities do more than make thieves. They set and symbolize the value preference of the overwhelming majority of our people. The city manufactures the cultural wasteland that is universally disseminated on film, tape, and microwaves; the city prints the pornography and the scandal sheets; it rips the ears with rivets, pneumatic drills, horns, and subways; it spews poisons into the air and pollution into our waters. Its over-crowding dehumanizes our souls, and destroys our sympathy.

"Hell", wrote George Bananos, "is not to love any more." Many of our cities are classrooms in Hell, and across the faces of teaming millions burdened by the hurried meaninglessness of the daily grind, are etched the words that Dante read as he and Virgil crossed into the Inferno, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here!"

It is the city as classroom that gives reinforcement to so many of the dismal aphorisms of this century: "You can't beat city hall!" "Never give a sucker an even break!" "It's all politics." "Don't get involved!" "Awww, so what?" "Get it while you can!" "I'm for me!"

"Up the establishment!" "Off the pigs!"

It has always been one of the self-centered follies of educators that we have believed that the school as classroom is an effective antidote to the city as classroom. Now that the city has entered the school in terrifyingly new and disruptive ways, perhaps we can begin to appreciate how limited in truth our past efforts have actually been. We are not even as successful as ancient monasteries--we cannot even keep the evil world at bay. Actually part of our failure has been our attempt to do just that.

What are nice guys like us doing in a world like this? Why does not someone pass a law or something? It is a sign of our growing maturity that we have come to realize the tragic depth of our condition--that laws are not enough, that legislation leaves a lot of the problem simply untouched. I say this not because new laws are not needed. (I happen to agree with Lord Macauley that "reformers are compelled to legislate fast because bigots will not legislate early".) I say it because at the root of our troubles are psychological difficulties that mark a bitter if transient point in our fitful evolution as a species. We have not escaped the bonds of ego, tribe, and things. In consequence, we clutter and threaten our world with the hostilities of status and possession. And this in face of the reality that the universalization of technology, and the very bustle of numbers on this globe, place a premium upon mutuality, self-transcendence, and reason if the species is in fact to survive.

Our task is not to fashion a new syllabus or a new curriculum. Our task is to fashion new kinds of human beings. And here, wonderfully and perversely, we cannot succeed unless we learn to use all of the educative resources that are to be found in our cities. We cannot succeed unless

we find ways to use our cities as classrooms.

In view of what I have previously said about the city as classroom, one might wonder what possible nutrients the city has for transforming human nature in any positive sense. The answer is that the nutrients are legion. For up to this point I have given you a one-sided view only.

If the city makes thieves and destroys human values, it also makes saints and reinvigorates human values. The city makes citizens out of strangers. The city is the focal point for the creation and reproduction and display of almost everything that is beautiful and ennobling and memorable in our civilization. It is in the great cities that theaters and symphonies and museums and libraries are located. In and around cities are the centers of the vast enterprises of commerce and industry, of medicine and social service, of transportation and communications that hold such enormous promise for the future of the human race. Cities are the foci of modern guilds and labor unions whose apprenticeships are such an important part of our total educative system. In the cities, professional and aesthetic talent of exquisite quality abounds. Cities are pluralistic; cities offer options. According to E. B. White, "The urban inhabitant is in the happy position of being able to choose his spectacle and so conserve his soul."

If cities turn out the "kitsch" of soap operas and crime series for TV, they also support Sesame Street and Jacques Cousteau. If the slums manufacture violence, they also create a myriad of quiet heroes (and some not so quiet) who see beyond the years "thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears". If most lives are lived, as Thoreau contended, in quiet

desperation, the city creates models of heroism, and reminds all of us of the words of Thoreau's Concord neighbor, Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Great men, great nations, are not boasters of buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it."

How, in fact, can the city be used as classroom?

--The exciting work of the Quincy Vocational Technical School in Quincy, Massachusetts in turning to the area's industries to discover the special skills necessary to fill the local job needs. "Project Able," as it is known, is revolutionizing the school's curriculum and its teaching emphases;

--"Project Score" in that city, where teachers supervise kids after school hours in a variety of service and community research assignments;

--"Project EPIC"--in the Cranston, Rhode Island public schools, in which 12th grade social studies students work with community leaders and informed citizens in investigating specific community, national, and international problems--using the combined resources of the school and the community;

--The Philadelphia Parkway School Project. It may not be universalizable in the sense of doing away completely with walled schools, but its basic theme of using the city as fully as possible as an educative resource is most certainly

universalizable. Parkway addresses itself to one of the central educational dilemmas of our times. In the words of James Coleman, "Modern society is information-rich and action-poor for the young";

--The direction pointed last summer by Jerry Bruner in collaboration with a conference sponsored by the Office of Child Development of HEW: the opening up on a national scale of opportunities for adolescents to take responsible roles in caring for young children. The Education Development Center of Cambridge, Massachusetts proposes to carry out this idea, utilizing day-care centers and offering professional training in child care for secondary school students;

--The Germantown, Pennsylvania, Area School Project involving students and community representatives in regular cooperative ventures ranging from curriculum-building in the humanities, arts, and social sciences to direct community service through established agencies. Over 100 community people, agencies, and institutions have been effectively utilized by the schools. High school course credit is given for at least some of these programs;

--The recent exciting prospectus of the Berkeley, California, Unified School District for creating competing options for public school students of all ages, based on the pluralism in the community. Parents and community representatives would be involved with the schools in various programs in and out of the regular school buildings;

--The community experiments of the John Adams High School in Portland, Oregon as a part of the National ES '70 consortium of high schools interested in improving vocational education;

--"Project Unique" in Rochester, New York, which among other things

has conducted an experimental class (known as Sibley's Satellite School) on the fourth floor of a downtown department store--this as a way of bringing educational innovation to the attention of the citizens at large;

--The Wave Hill Environmental Studies Center's Project in Harlem and south Bronx in which children are encouraged to explore city streets and report back on particular physical features. Thus such mysteries as moss growing in the crannies of decaying city walls can serve as an introduction to classroom lessons in Biology;

--The Educational Talent Pool Reserve scenario developed by ECCO (the Educational and Cultural Center of Onondaga County) in my home town of Syracuse. ECCO is one of the 16 regional educational planning centers set up by the State Education Department in New York. The Talent Pool Reserve would be a list of human resources in the area (housewives, engineers, artists, accountants, inventors--you name it) who would make a life-long commitment, offering adjunct educational contributions to the schools and colleges of the region.

I have only scratched the surface. New ways to tap the educative resources of cities are mushrooming daily. They extend from bringing exciting citizens and programs into the schools as adjunct "instructors", to work-study and in-service training programs that involve moving the youngsters out of traditional schools entirely. I do not have an exhaustive catalog of these uses of cities as classrooms. Perhaps the Council staff could perform a useful clearing-house function for you--for all of us. [redacted]

But exciting as all of this is and can be, it represents today only a drop in the bucket. All too many of our urban and suburban schools are

tradition-bound, custodial, crisis-ridden, and cynical. One principal in my city tried to reassure a baffled substitute teacher in an urban school last month by saying, "Look, if you have kept any semblance of order for half the time, you're a huge success." But it may be the very notion of order that is at fault. Even when achieved, it may be wrong. As my colleague Ralph Hambrick has put it, "A classroom of 30 children all the same age, sitting neatly in rows, with hands folded, so quiet that one 'can hear a pin drop' may be the real chaos in the schools." Kids--and especially troubled kids--are hyper-thyroid. Getting them out of the formal classroom may be the only way to command their attention. What many of them are screaming at us is what Alfred North Whitehead wrote in quiet prose, "Without adventure," Whitehead suggested "civilization is in full decay." One of the ways to get adventure back into education is to expose kids directly to the chartless frontiers of urban pathology and to the wondrous options of urban creativity and life styles.

Cities are ecological laboratories. They are places where the sheer numbers of interacting people provide a marvelous observatory for human behavior and for behavioral consequences. Cities provide the delights of privacy as well as that terrifying companion of privacy: loneliness. Cities teem with conflicts; and with the political, governmental, and economic means for resolving conflicts peacefully. Cities are masses of unsolved problems--a sufficient number of problems to keep the lives of untold generations seeking solutions filled with adventure.

And cities, to repeat an earlier theme, are vast educative resources

in their myriad occupational, professional, and aesthetic manifestations.

It may be heresy, but I believe firmly that State Educational Departments, including our own, must take a whole new look at the idea of compulsory attendance--at least as presently interpreted. As adults, we make claims on our society for almost endless options--to take care of differences in talent, aspiration, and energy. And yet we insist on locking youngsters into developmental straight-jackets. Why should some classes not take place in industrial settings under the joint sponsorship of industry and labor? Why should restless kids, age 14 or 15, not have the chance to drop out of traditional schools at will, and without stigma, and to drop into non-traditional classrooms in city museums, libraries, performing arts centers, and auto-repair garages? Why should not some of the three R's be taught at home through cable TV, or at a work site through tutorials or specially organized classes?

Until we face up to these needs and possibilities, we will continue to have vast amounts of unrest in our schools. It is true that reforms of the kind suggested would mean that existing insurance laws, educational regulations, and labor laws would have to be re-examined and modified. But-why not? Most of these laws were put on the books in a totally different era. They are hardly sacrosanct in a world of exploding educational technologies like cable television, home video cassettes, and mobile science laboratories that enormously extend the range of locations where education can take place.

We are in trouble. Fortunately we now recognize that we are. No lid is going to be placed on the bubbling caldron we observe. Not even alliterative Vice-Presidents have that power. Restless, rootless youngsters need something to live by, something to capture their imagination, something to absorb their energies, something to give them a sense of adventure and meaning. And they desperately need models, people models, who give a damn about them and who by example demonstrate that civilized behavior can be exciting and joyful. There are an insufficient number of these models in our schools. Only the larger community can supply them in sufficient quantity and intimacy.

There is always a danger that in conjuring an exciting future, one will be massively unfair to the past and the present. Even if it were desirable (which it is not) suddenly to empty our schools and turn all youngsters loose in the asphalt jungle, the logistics of such an operation would be quite impossible. For as far ahead as I can see, most formal education will have to take place inside school buildings. Most children will have to be taught by certified teachers, not by shop foremen or industrial engineers. The consequence of this reality is that we must apply our best minds to bringing the best of the city into the classroom at the same time that we exploit the classroom potential of the city itself.

The model of the city--at least, the city at its best--has a lot to offer the schools. For the city permits enormous options. It allows talents to be developed and successes to be achieved in a variety of ways. It

praises the ballet dancer, whether or not she can do calculus. The city is patient about differing learning speeds. The city allows a number of ways for its citizens to participate in the making of decisions that affect them. The city's labor market is the ultimate validating instrument of educational achievement. To do a particular job, the city says, "You've got to know something, or know how to do something." The city provides many reinforcing ways of learning simple realities.

These are some of the lessons the city has for the schools. If we take these seriously, we can begin to make our formal classrooms into exciting and productive educational enterprises. As Saul Touster has written with great eloquence, the traditional "delivery" model of teaching must give way to a "field-of-force" model—his useful imagery for minimizing the classroom lecture and maximizing meaningful and diverse educative exposures and experiences, in and out of the classroom.

There are many great teachers hidden in the homes and places of employment of our great cities. These must be sought out and used with increasing frequency and effectiveness. But most of our teachers are, and will continue to be, inside the schools. It is their capacity to take lessons from the city, as well as their capacity to use the city for educational purposes, that will determine the future of the collective enterprise in which we are engaged. All many of them need is your leadership and your inspiration.

Sixty years ago, H. G. Wells wrote an obscure novel called The New Machiavelli. In it the main character says at one point, "If humanity cannot develop an education far beyond anything that is now provided, if it cannot collectively invent devices and solve problems on a much richer,

broader scale than it does at the present time, it cannot hope to achieve any very much finer order or any more general happiness than it now enjoys."

This says it all. I leave you with only one piece of gratuitous advice. When you return to your respective homes, offices, and classrooms, and find the same crunch, the same in-basket, the same crises, the same weariness, take a moment, look out the window at your surrounding city and say out loud, "I was once told that only professionals could and should run schools. It isn't true now, if it ever was."

And then, mentally, I want you to see yourself standing in a circle -- an open circle -- formed by the linkage of hands of supervisors, teachers, para-professionals, students, maintenance men, legislators, business men, labor leaders, school board members, museum directors, doctors, social workers, artists, police, bus drivers, parents, older brothers and sisters, TV managers, in short, all your civic neighbors -- and you are saying to them very simply, but earnestly, "We need each other."

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